

A Visit to

Radio Finland

by Jeff Chanowitz

Radio Finland is one of shortwave's finer stations that, aside from some criticism of the station's strict "no QSL" policy, seldom seems to receive much publicity. A progressive and often innovative station, it seeks to be the world's primary source of Nordic news. Jeff Chanowitz had the opportunity to visit the Helsinki-based station, interviewing director Juhani Niinisto and several staff members. His report provides some fascinating insight into Radio Finland.

Nestled in the northeastern reaches of Western Europe lies the small five million-strong nation of Finland. For most Americans, Finland seems somehow distant, conjuring up images of blinding snow, blond women, and polar bears. Listeners to Radio Finland know better, these stereotypes having been replaced by the latest news of the Nordic region.

Located in a huge complex of white buildings in the capital of Helsinki, Yleisradio — more commonly known by its acronym YLE — is the government-owned broadcast service that operates four FM radio networks, three television networks, and an international radio service. Although

it's known as Radio Finland, the international service is not a separate department but a part of YLE 3, the FM network that broadcasts news and regional programming.

The international service began in 1939, a critical year for Finland. That year, nearly 23 years after gaining independence from Russia, Finland was invaded by Soviet troops and forced to fight alone for its political survival against overwhelming odds. It was at this time that Finland took to the airwaves, broadcasting in order to plead its case to the world.

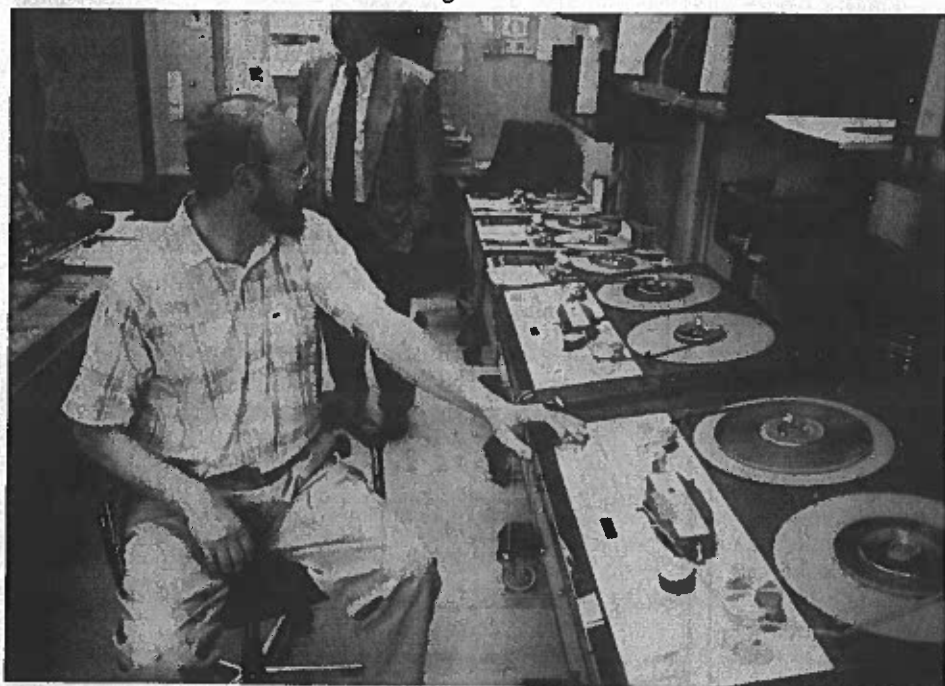
Following a protracted war in which the country managed to retain its sovereignty,

Finland signed a peace treaty with the Soviet Union in 1944 and reinstated its political policy of neutrality. In 1957, the international service was discontinued, remaining off the air for some ten years. It resumed broadcasting its international service in 1967 and in 1978, the service was reorganized into the current news format.

Today, Radio Finland is composed of 35 full and part-time employees with programs in Finnish, Swedish, English, German and French, as well as a unique weekly broadcast in classic Latin. The English language service is the oldest foreign language to be offered by the international service, but it's not the most popular. Audience figures are fairly hard to gauge in international broadcasting. However, judging from the 15,000 letters received annually, the German service seems to be the most popular, garnering the bulk of the mail. The English and Finnish language services rank second and third respectively.

In 1972, Juhani Niinisto joined the YLE staff. Currently, he presides over the international service's operations. During a conversation at the YLE studios, he stated that, "Radio Finland's primary mission involves communicating the latest news to Finnish nationals abroad." However, Finnish nationals comprise but a tiny percentage of the audience. The service's secondary mission, which involves communicating the news and views of Finland to the world, represents a much greater audience and is the main target of the international service's programming.

"Not many bad things happen to Finland," Niinisto remarked. This is why the U.S. media tends to ignore the country. Because of this fact, Radio Finland's international service plays an important role as one of the few sources of Finnish news for the world. This role prompts the station to put more



Mr. Hannu Bernstrom, studio manager at YLE's external broadcasting continuity unit, plays the recorded English broadcast. Juhanni Niinisto, head of the external service, stands in the background.

emphasis on consistently providing accurate and in-depth stories as a part of the regular news coverage.

In addition to covering Finland, Niinisto sees Radio Finland as a "regional service" that competes with Radio Sweden for listeners wanting the latest coverage of the Nordic region. As Niinisto says, "We want our service to have a competitive edge." The use of a toll-free "800" telephone number in the United States is an example of innovative ideas that are a part of Niinisto's philosophy.

Designed to attract and service listeners, the toll free audience response line provides a quick and inexpensive way for listeners to request schedules, ask questions, or make statements to be aired on the audience mail program, "Air Mil." In the United States, the number is 1-800-221-9539. Outside the U.S., the number is 1-203-688-5540.

Radio Finland also tries to attain its "competitive edge" through programs like *Business Today*. "This business program," says Niinisto, "takes advantage of shortwave's ability to provide the latest news fast, thus beating the U.S. media by over a month." In addition to *Business Monday*, Radio Finland provides a number of weekly programs that reflect the life and interests that make up democratic Finnish society. These include *Sports Fare*, *Faiths in Finland*, *Learning Finnish*, *Out and About*, *Perspectives*, and *Air Mail*.

On a daily basis, Radio Finland presents a

daily press review and *Northern Report*, which is a summary of the day's news. Occasionally, Radio Finland also presents features like *Fifty Years Ago Today*, a series of historic programs that presented the events that led up to the Soviet/Finnish War.

In keeping with the international service's competitive philosophy, the English language service is in the process of molding its sound in a style similar to AM radio news in the U.S. This is reflected in a recent move that brought Terry Shultz straight from a station in the United States to Finland for the sole purpose of Americanizing the news sound. Shultz is heard daily reading news and is just one of the many American expatriates on the Radio Finland staff.

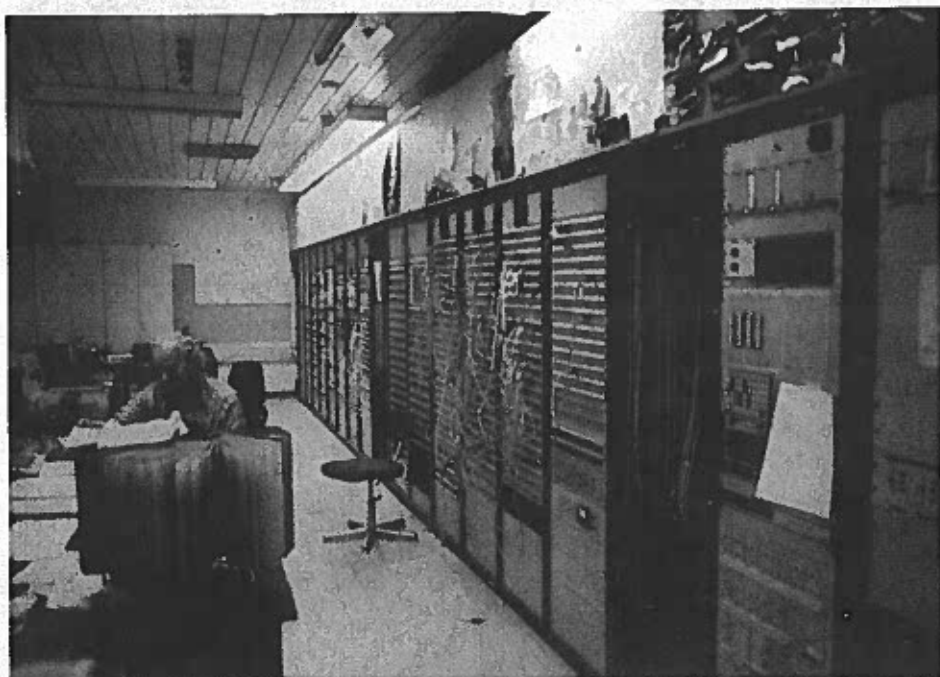
Kimmo Wilska is another ex-patriate who spent much of his early life in New Mexico. Wilska had actually listened to the service before he became a staff member. He recalled that his father, who was a Finnish native, owned a shortwave radio and was proud of the antenna that he had set up for the purpose of receiving Radio Finland's broadcasts. Later, when Wilska went back to Finland and saw an ad in the paper that mentioned an opening at the international service, he jumped at the chance and was hired.

Today, Wilska is one of the few members on the staff that speaks English and Finnish fluently. He is also one of the few staff members that both read and write news. On occasion, he still talks with friends from

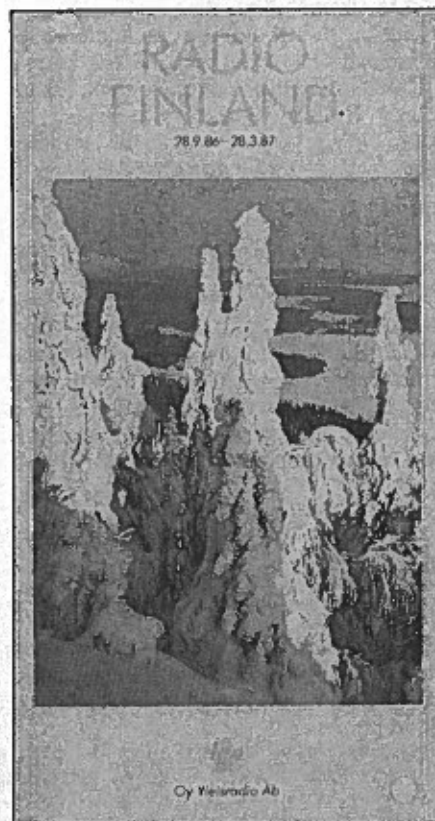


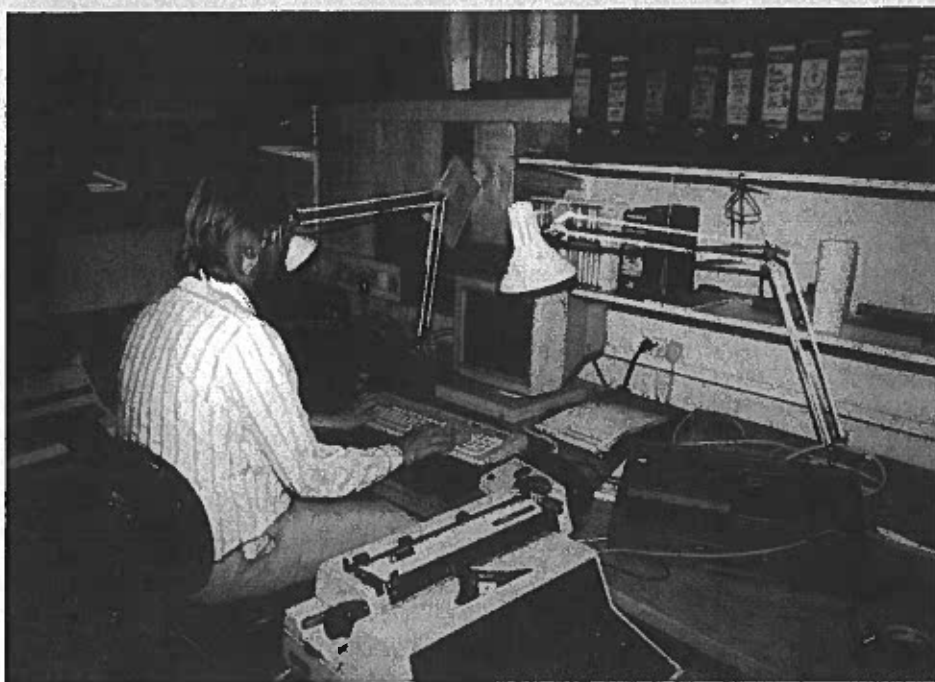
Nestled in the northeastern corner of Europe, Finnish natives are often amused by the misconceptions entertained especially by Americans regarding their country.

Below: A schedule cover is the closest you'll come to a QSL (this one from Ray Labrie of New Hampshire)



The main control center at YLE.





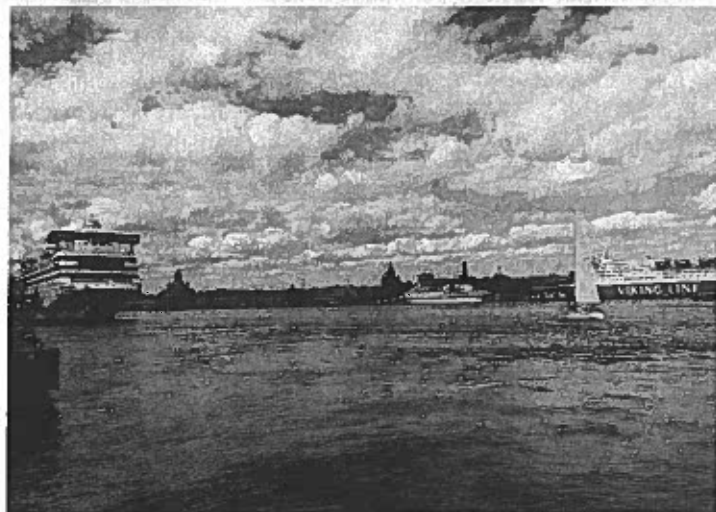
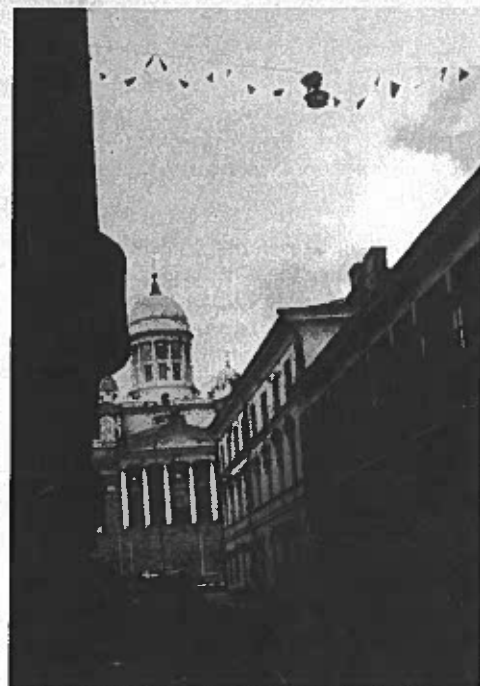
Kimmo Wilska of the external English broadcast is one of the few staff members that can both read and write the news.

America and says he's amused at some of the questions he gets about Finland. He stated, "One person asked if there were polar bears roaming the streets of Helsinki!"

While in many respects Radio Finland is "listener friendly," it has a strict non-verification policy. Niinisto is candid about the subject: "The QSL business has been a very bad thing for international broadcasting." He justifies the policy saying, "If Radio Finland cannot stand on its own purposes, then the service should not exist."

Despite the recent addition of new transmitters, Radio Finland's signal is most consistently receivable only during the morning hours. The service broadcasts at 6:50-7:05 EDT, which is 1050-1115 UTC on 21550 in the 13 meter band, or 15400 in the 19 meter band -- Monday through Friday, 8:00-8:25, which is 1200-1225 UTC on the frequencies, and 9:00-9:25 EDT, which is 1300-1325 on the same frequencies 7 days a week.

The quality of evening broadcasts are variable; however, they can be received at 7:00 p.m. EDT, which is 2300 UTC on 15185 in the 19 meter band and 11755 in the 25 meter band. A schedule can be provided by calling the audience response line or writing Radio Finland, Box 10, 00241 Helsinki, Finland.



Some "tourist" shots -- Boats in Helsinki Harbor; not far from the harbor is this church in downtown Helsinki; one of the many lakes for which Finland is famous. Finland is a beautiful country in which, as Niinisto remarked, "Not much bad happens."